

**GENDER BIAS, SEX EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PSYCHE:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF FREE OUTGOING BY ANUPAMA
CHANDRASEKHAR**

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Abstract

The play Free Outgoing deals with a delicate theme of teenage involvement in sexual activity, followed by socio-moral censure, condemnation, and vilification, particularly of female sex. Sexual thoughts during adolescence are a taboo subject in conservative societies like India. Society expects children to conform to the roles of 'good boys' and 'good girls,' focusing solely on their studies. It turns a distasteful blind eye to this issue, as it itself is uninformed in this regard, which is why its response is often naïve, misguided, and cynical. Teenagers, lacking proper guidance on normative sexual development, navigate their own ways to understand themselves in relation to the newly arising sexual feelings, sometimes leading to socially undesirable behavior. However, if such incidents occur, society needs to learn how to address the issue in an appropriate manner. Anupama Chandrasekhar's play Free Outgoing raises the issue of gender-bias in contemporary society. The present paper is an attempt to study the deeply rooted gender-bias in the age of information communication technology.

Key Words: *Gender-bias, Gender abuse, Digital abuse, Cyber sexism, Trolling, and Digital space.*

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Introduction:

Free Outgoing, a highly acclaimed play by Anupama Chandrasekhar, addresses emerging forms of gender abuse in the digital age. While human society is making rapid technological advancements, progress toward a gender-equal and sexually educated society remains sluggish. These issues are deeply interconnected; a truly gender-equal society cannot exist without proper sexual education. Chandrasekhar's play highlights how technological advancements have introduced new forms of sexual abuse that disproportionately affect women. In a male-dominated and gender-biased society, digital platforms have become another arena for vilifying and condemning women. Through this play, Chandrasekhar critically examines and exposes the deep-seated biases within the social psyche. The lack of ethical governance with regard to the use of social media has led to sexual exploitation and cyber abuse of women, posing significant threats to the integrity of the digital landscape. *Free Outgoing*, these issues are poignantly explored within the context of a traditional society grappling with the rapid advancements in technology. Through this exploration, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on creating a gender-equal and sexually educated society wherein digital environments would encourage women to engage without fear of violence or discrimination.

Discussion:

Deepa, a high school student, engages in an intimate act with her boyfriend, Jeevan, at school, who secretly records their encounter and, in an effort to garner a sense of power and recognition, shares the video with a friend, who in turn makes it viral on social media. This incident brings immense dishonor to Deepa and her family. Despite being a brilliant and dedicated student who excels both academically and in extracurricular activities, Deepa's one misstep—her attempt to navigate emerging sexual feelings—leads to severe moral vilification and condemnation for her and her family. Adolescence is the most critical stage in the human development cycle. At this stage significant changes happen in individuals. Today's teenagers are tomorrow's citizens of the nation they belong to. It is the moral responsibility of all the institutions of the concerned nation to groom their future citizens in a healthy manner. Sex education is their initiation into the functional world around people.

Deepa's mother, Malini, feeling utterly powerless, pleads with the school principal to delete the videos, only to realize that the damage to her daughter's reputation was irreversible as the video continued to spread uncontrollably. In her desperation, Malini confronted Jeevan's father, Santosh, who shrugged off the responsibility by blaming Malini for her daughter's behavior.

Both Deepa and Jeevan were expelled from school, but while Malini's family endured relentless insults, social ostracism forced them to vacate their apartment, Jeevan remained largely unscathed. The news channels sensationalized Deepa's story, making her the center of media attention, while Jeevan escaped public criticism. The lack of counseling from the school, combined with the absence of support from the community and media in seeking justice for Deepa and her family, starkly highlights the pervasive gender discrimination at play.

Social Media: A Threat for Women: The play effectively highlights the serious and often overlooked consequences of social media misuse, especially

among impulsive teenagers who may not fully grasp the risks posed by online platforms. Gender plays a significant role in online abuse, with women and girls disproportionately subjected to cyber sexism. This is largely due to societal norms that place greater emphasis on preserving a woman's honor and family reputation compared to that of men.

The widespread accessibility of social media, along with its complex web of connections, advanced video creation and manipulation tools, and the rapid speed of content dissemination, all play a major role in perpetuating cyber sexism. The impact of online sexual harassment on a woman's honor can be just as devastating as physical exploitation. Furthermore, the continuous and uncontrollable sharing of such content intensifies the damage, leading to repeated assaults on her dignity. Trolling, defined as the act of posting disruptive or inflammatory comments online to provoke others into futile discussions, is a phenomenon that further exacerbates the issue (Herring, 2002). The play presents a realistic portrayal of a family torn apart by the chaos and aggression that online abuse brings. The victim's family, particularly her younger brother Sharan, experiences social stigma and shame, leading to his expulsion from school despite his innocence. The viral nature of the video exacerbates his sense of dishonor, driving him to confront his sister in a fit of rage, branding her a "whore" and threatening her life.

In response to the crisis, Malini, the mother, takes extreme measures to erase any trace of her daughter's past, symbolically disposing of Deepa's personal belongings and cutting off their connection to technology. This act represents a desperate bid to reclaim control and safeguard the family's remaining dignity. However, the situation deteriorates further when Sharan, Deepa's brother, uncovers that Ramesh, a trusted colleague of Malini who was supposed to offer support, had also downloaded the incriminating video. This betrayal deepened the family's sense of isolation and mistrust.

The play compellingly portrays the wide-ranging impact of online abuse, demonstrating how it not only shatters the life of the individual victim but also tears apart the very fabric of family relationships. The narrative

underscores the harmful role social media plays in perpetuating misogyny and violence, revealing how these digital platforms can become powerful tools of deep social and emotional devastation.

Criticism on Education: The dramatist presents a stark and realistic portrayal of how schools and educational institutions often fail to support students in crisis. In this case, the principal of the school was more concerned with protecting the school's reputation than with the well-being of a bright and sincere student like Deepa. Rather than offering the necessary counseling to both Deepa and Jeevan, which could have helped them understand their mistakes and continue their education.

The true purpose of education should be to impart wisdom and help students discern right from wrong. However, in this case, the school fails in its responsibility to provide the moral and emotional support that Deepa and her family desperately need. The Parents Teachers Association (PTA) could have been instrumental in offering solidarity and assistance to Deepa's mother, guiding her through the overwhelming loss of honor and ensuring that it did not face the ordeal in isolation. Instead, the lack of empathy and action from both; the school and the PTA, highlights a broader failure within the educational system to address such critical issues with the compassion and care they deserve.

Lack of supportive role of Society:

The dramatist probes into the stark absence of a supportive societal system for victims of online abuse. Malini and her family face intense ostracization from their apartment community, who demand them to vacate their home due to the perceived dishonor and stigma associated with Deepa's situation. The neighbors' cruelty is evident as they hurl stones at the windows and threaten the family with brooms. Kokila, a neighbor, complains that the entire apartment complex was suffering because of Deepa, citing disruptions like the absence of water, postal services, and security, as the watchman fled due to

the incident. The residents' demand for the family's immediate eviction highlights their pettiness and lack of compassion.

Kokila further exacerbates the situation by spreading malicious rumors, claiming that newspapers reported Deepa as having AIDS or running away with a boy. The apartment's residents represent a microcosm of narrow-mindedness, where they fail to hold Jeevan, who was equally involved in the sexual act, accountable. Instead, they focus all their judgment and punishment on Deepa, ignoring the boys who trolled and distributed the video without her consent.

As Billington Michael astutely observes in his review, the play effectively exposes India's sexual double standards by confining the narrative within the apartment walls while revealing how disgrace falls solely upon Deepa rather than her boyfriend. The fact that Deepa herself is never seen on stage is symbolically suggestive of how society erases and silences female victims of sexual scandal (The Guardian, 13 Nov. 2007).

The play also underscores the gender discrimination deeply ingrained in society. When Malini accuses Jeevan of raping Deepa, Santhosh, Jeevan's father, rushes to protect his son, highlighting the double standard where the loss of a man's honor is given far less importance than that of a woman. As Anupama Chandrasekhar noted in an interview with Edward Hower, the play explores the conflicting Indian views on female sexuality, illustrating how patriarchal values exacerbate the suffering of women while shielding men from similar scrutiny (K. K. Sunalini).

News media –Media Caught Between Constructive Advocacy and Sensationalist Publicity: In *Free Outgoing*, the media viciously targets Deepa and her family, turning their private tragedy into sensationalized breaking news solely to boost TRP. The relentless coverage, characterized by scathing attacks, reduces Deepa to a spectacle, as she is labeled "India's most watched teenager" by the TV channel. This constant media barrage, exemplified by TV reporter Usha's repeated attempts to coerce Deepa and her mother Malini into

on-screen interviews, raises critical questions about the invasion of personal privacy.

The media, in *Free Outgoing*, stokes public curiosity about Deepa's case and video, exploiting the situation for sensationalism. Chandrasekhar captures the media frenzy through Malini's anguished expression: "What? Are you mad? After what they did to me? All those dirty hands, filthy groping hands, thrusting cameras in my face, taunting me, tearing my dupatta" (31). The public, swayed by the perceived authenticity of the media, struggles to discern the truth. While news channels have the power to guide public opinion, the consumer-driven media in the play instead humiliates the victim and her family, prioritizing ratings over responsible reporting. Media should give informed direction to the masses, but here it is rather catering to the general psyche. The interview of Malini by a news reporter Usha Singh is enough to comment that the media catered more for TRP rather than solution to the problem. It falls short of forming a sensible public opinion against the issue. The show concludes by announcing a competition, asking viewers, "Who do you think should be held responsible for the MMS incident? A) Parents, B) The school, or C) Society" (53), with a trip to Tokyo offered as a prize for the winner. Ultimately, Deepa is paraded before the media as India's most-watched teenager.

Conclusion:

Free Outgoing effectively explores the devastating consequences of online abuse and the deep-seated gender discrimination that amplifies the suffering of women and their families in such incidents. Deepa's story, while rooted in a single tragic event, reflects broader societal issues such as the harmful role of social media, the failures of educational institutions, and the lack of empathy from both the community and the media. The play vividly illustrates how emerging sexual feelings, combined with the misuse of technology, can lead to severe moral vilification, particularly for women, whose honor is disproportionately valued and scrutinized compared to men. Through the portrayal of ruthless media, the play emphasizes the need for a more

compassionate and responsible societal response, including better sex education, support from educational institutions, and media that prioritizes responsible reporting over profit-driven sensationalism. *Free Outgoing* serves as a powerful critique of how society fails its young women, revealing the urgent need for systemic change to address the root causes of cyber sexism, gender inequality, and the failures of the educational and social systems in protecting and supporting victims of online abuse.

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